

Advent 1: Time

The first in a series of Advent reflections and prayers, taking a fresh look at some rich Advent themes – beginning with 'time'.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1.3-5).

Advent candles

Light is a powerful symbol, especially at this time of year. The coming and going of light is an essential marker of time. Light is also a sign of hope; for Christians it speaks of the coming of Christ, the light of the world. Make time each day of Advent to light a candle. This can provide an opportunity not only to mark the simple passage of time, but also to reflect on those significant moments or 'hinges' in time that had particular meaning, and signalled a change or an opportunity. You could use a traditional Advent wreath, or perhaps adapt one by adding a candle each day for a week. You could light the candles before sharing a family meal to encourage the sharing of experiences and memories.

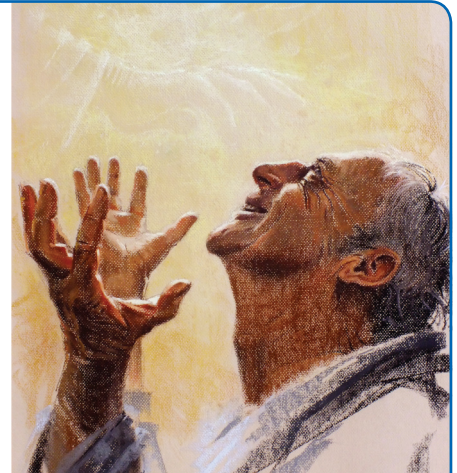
Advent themes take us right back to the calling of the people of Israel: Are there significant moments for your own history which took place before your birth/ gathering? Or in a previous generation? Not every moment will necessarily be happy, some may mark loss, adversity or pain. As you note these 'hinge' moments, how do you respond – with thanks, with sadness, with forgiveness? Do you recognise the presence of God in those moments? Can you tell the story of your candles to someone else?

Pray

God of past, present and future, be the light which guides us on our journeys, which illuminates our understanding and which shines through us as a beacon of hope for others. **Amen.**

Questions for reflection

- ▶ How might you feel if you were held in God's gaze?
- ▶ How do you praise God?
- ▶ How might you stand up and make a difference?



A reflective way into prayer

Reflect on the signs you saw on your way to or from church, or on any other journey – road signs, street signs, etc. What signs have you noticed in the people you have met this morning (e.g. of stress, tiredness, joy)? What do the signs/notices in church say about us? After a few moments of silence, pray together:

*Lord of Advent,
signs can warn, annoy, inform and inspire.
May we as your people be signs to your world
of your longing to unite us all as one family –
safe from things that can discourage us,
alert to things that can divide us,
appreciative of things that enrich us,
and open to things that are kingdom-shaped and spirit-filled.
Amen.*

A personal prayer

*Lord Jesus, on you the past and the future hinge.
You open the door to past wisdom and to future knowledge.
You are the kingdom among us and the kingdom yet to come.
May this Advent be as a new beginning in my walk of faith.
And, inspired by all those who have gone before me,
may my steps be bold, faithful and just.
I ask this in your name. Amen.*

Live your faith

Look out for, rejoice in, and actively support a sign of God's coming kingdom as revealed through ordinary actions done to extraordinary effect in your community.

Advent 2: Place

The second of our Advent reflections and prayers, looks at the way on which our path through life interconnects with those of so many other people.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God (Luke 3.4b,6).

Christmas cards

Since Victorian times it has been a custom to send Christmas cards, conveying our personal greetings to friends and family, especially to those who live some distance away. For many, this may be the only opportunity in the year to keep connected with those whose paths crossed ours at an earlier time of our lives. As you write your Christmas cards and greetings (or send them electronically) this year, take time to reflect on how your list of recipients reflects the story of your life, and the places and situations you have been a part of.

Who are the people you value in this way? How do they fit into the story of your life? Is there any significance in how or when these people became involved in your life? Acknowledge, too, if this brings to mind the sadness of losses. As a family or church group, can you share the story of your connections to some of the more far-flung recipients, or those who have been part of your life for the longest?

As we ponder the coming of Christ, can you think of ways to extend your connections into new places? Is social media able to help us to spread positive messages to a wider audience? Could you send cards or messages to victims of injustice supported by Amnesty International, to refugees far from home, or to fellow Christians elsewhere in the world through a church twinning scheme?

Pray

God of the journey, we thank you for the network of relationships we treasure at this time of year. Give us hearts to send your love ever wider into the world, taking our small part in helping 'all people to see the salvation of God'. Amen.

Questions for reflection

- ▶ How does this labyrinth draw you in?
- ▶ Where are you on this journey?
- ▶ Does the light of God guide you?



A prayer of approach

*We come to you this Advent, Lord,
with gratitude in our hearts
for those who have led us to faith,
for those who have prepared the way
for us to hear your voice calling us
and to receive your love surrounding us.
May we too prepare the way for others,
that all may feel a sense of belonging
in your Church and in your world. Amen.*

A reflective way into prayer

Imagine a desert. In your mind's eye, gradually draw into it all those you know who are in need. Keep a few moments of silence, then pray:

God of the desert, bless with your healing touch those in need today. Help them to encounter you in a new way, and to be filled with your Spirit of hope and purpose. Amen.

A personal prayer

Eternal God, you called John when he was in the wilderness, to prepare the way for your Son. Speak to me in my wildernesses of tiredness, anxiety and longing, and prepare a way in my heart, that I may receive the forgiveness, the healing, and the peace that your Son delights to give. Amen.

Live your faith

Listen out for the voices of people on the margins of our society. Are they calling for the values of the kingdom of God? How can you add your voice to theirs?

Advent 3: Action

The third in our series of Advent reflections and prayers calls us to action.

And the crowds asked him 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise (Luke 3.10-11).

Christmas shopping

Shopping, cooking, decorating, carol services, gatherings – all the activities of the Christmas period can be a wonderful expression of the deep connection, love and celebration we share with others at this time of year. But at times, many of us also find the expectations of lavish spending and overindulgence to be distractions and burdens. Sometimes the busyness of this time of year can make us feel as though we're dancing to the wrong tune and our priorities have been distorted.

If commercially-driven convention didn't dictate how we spend energy, time and money at Christmas, how else might you choose to respond to the call of John the Baptist to transform your life in response to the coming of Christ? If you buy gifts this year, consider the alternative gift range from many charities which support good causes, or creating a shoebox full of small gifts to be distributed by charities working among very poor communities. If you cook, could you contribute to a Christmas meal for the lonely or homeless in your community? If you attend school or community events, can you invite elderly, isolated or lonely neighbours to join you, or organise to go carol singing and instead of collecting money, give out chocolates with a Christmas greeting to those you visit.

Pray

Lord God, when the pressures of the season lead us away from you, guide our thoughts and actions back to the simple manger and the gift of life and hope for all people. Amen.

Questions for reflection

- ▶ Have you seen a 'clothes for the homeless' scheme like this?
- ▶ What might you give to someone in need?
- ▶ What do you recognise that needs to change in yourself?



A prayer of approach

God of urgency and passion, you chose John the Baptist to be your prophet, and to embody earthly holiness. When we would recoil from his coarseness, challenge our hearts that we may not miss that glimpse of your righteousness embedded in his call to repentance. Turn our faces towards Bethlehem, and let us come close to you, rejoicing that you call those whom we would not, and celebrating your all-inclusive love that is Christmas. Amen.

A reflective way into prayer

Reflect on your own life in the light of this week's Gospel reading, and gently ask the question: What should I do? In a few moments of silence, name in your heart one thing that you could change. Pray (together, if possible):

God of action and of silence, we commit to you today that which we have named in our hearts.

Help us to be always ready to re-evaluate our lives in the light of your challenge and your love. Amen.

A personal prayer

*Lord, when I am weighed down with tiredness,
when I feel trapped by things I cannot change,
when my list of cards to write, presents to buy, and people to visit
is longer than the hours in my day,
help me to use your winnowing shovel
to separate the crucial from the cosmetic,
and not always to be trying to do more, but to do less better. Amen.*

Live your faith

What part of your ordinary life could do with greater honesty, integrity or compassion? Make that change this week!

Advent 4: People

The fourth and last in our series of Advent reflections and prayers considers the encounters between Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph and Zechariah.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women' (Luke 1.41-42).

The Christmas crib

Many Christmas cribs and posadas will be on display now in homes, churches, schools and elsewhere, peopled with characters essential to the story of Christ's birth. The nativity story is all about encounters, many of them unexpected but joy-filled, as heavenly angels and earthy shepherds mingle with different generations of a family experiencing a turbulent chain of events. Elizabeth's joy and encouragement to Mary must have contrasted with the rejection and hostility she would have expected from her local community. Mary's parents and Joseph were at the heart of Mary's experience, as Zechariah was for Elizabeth. The birth itself was surrounded by strangers in a town Mary didn't know, visited by nearby hill-farmers. Christ's coming was located in the real-life story of multiple people in various places.

Pray

Lord Jesus, son of Mary, recognised by Elizabeth, loved by Joseph, welcomed by strangers, nurtured by family, bless the bonds which tie us to those around us and bring joy and understanding to those relationships which are hard. Amen.

Questions for reflection

- ▶ What strikes you about this contemporary nativity?
- ▶ What might this couple's story be?
- ▶ How would you help this Mary and Joseph?



A reflective way into prayer

*'How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
And God imparts to human hearts the blessing of his heaven.'
As we reflect quietly on those words,
may we take that blessing into our homes...(pause)
into our places of work and learning...
into the turmoil of our lives and our world...
into the depths of our hearts...
that we may know true peace
this Christmas and always. Amen.*

A personal prayer

*Lord Jesus,
you come as the living word, to be the voice of the voiceless.
You come as the word made flesh, to clothe our mistakes.
You come as the light in the darkness, to illumine our hope.
You come as the lamb of God, to transform our brutality.
You come from the womb of Mary,
to bring all creation to new birth.
You come as the child of humility, and the servant of love.
Come to me afresh this Christmas Day, dear Lord Jesus. Amen.*

A sending out prayer

*Treasure with Mary the miracle of Christmas.
Celebrate with the shepherds the joy of Christmas.
Sing with the angels the song of Christmas.
And go in the peace of the child of Christmas. Amen.*

For reflection and comment linking this week's Bible reading to the news, current issues and events, go to www.rootsontheweb.com and click on PostScript.



Live your faith

Look for signs of the unexpected God at work this week. Where is God at work in strange places? Is there an unexpected place where you can do something to share the good news?